

AN INSTRUMENT OF THE GODS¹

By LINCOLN COLCORD

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YOU think the Chinese are prosaic," said Nichols from the darkness of his corner. "I've listened to you closely. You fellows have been discussing only superficialities. At heart, you and the Oriental are the same. The Chinese are romantic, I tell you; they are heroic. Yes, really. Let me tell you a tale."

Suddenly he laughed. "You won't be convinced. But strip my friend Lee Fu Chang naked, forget about that long silken coat of his; dress him in a cowboy's suit and locate him on the Western plains, and the game he played with Captain Wilbur won't seem so inappropriate. You merely won't expect a mandarin Chinaman to play it. You'll feel that China is too civilized for what he did.

"Some of you fellows must remember the notorious case of Captain Wilbur and the 'Speedwell;' but I'll briefly refresh your memories: He was a well-known shipmaster of the palmy days, and his vessel was one of the finest clippers ever launched on the shores of New England. But she was growing old; and Wilbur had suffered serious financial reverses, though the fact wasn't generally known.

"To make a long story short, he put the 'Speedwell' ashore in Ombay Pass, on a voyage from Singapore to New York, and abandoned her as she lay. Within a month after sailing, he was back again in Singapore with his ship's company in three long boats and a tale of a lost vessel. No hint of scandal was raised against the affair. The insurance companies stood the gaff, the business was closed up without a hitch, and the name of the 'Speedwell'

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"Wilbur went immediately to Batavia, and there hired a schooner and crew with the proceeds of his personal holdings in the vessel. He sailed for Ombay Pass; after a period of magnificent sailorizing and superhuman effort he floated the ship and patched her so that she would stay afloat. When he appeared off Batavia roadstead with the 'Speedwell' under topgallant-sails, it was the sensation of the port; and when it transpired what he intended to do with her, the news flew like wildfire about the China Sea. For he proposed to hold the ship as salvage; and nothing, apparently, could be done about it. He found men willing to advance him credit, bought off his Lascar crew, took the 'Speedwell' to Hong Kong and put her in dry dock, and soon was ready for business with a fine ship of his own.

"I was off on a trading voyage while these events were taking place. I heard them first from Lee Fu Chang.

"'An extraordinary incident!' exclaimed Lee Fu in conclusion. 'I am deeply interested. It is a crowning stroke that he has not seen fit to change the name of the vessel. All is as it was before, when the well-known and reputable Captain Wilbur commanded his fine ship, the "Speedwell," on voyages to the East.'

"'Does the crowd have anything to do with him?' I asked.

"'None of his old associates speak in passing. He goes about like a man afflicted with a pestilence. Apparently, he is not disturbed by this treatment. He makes no protest, offers no excuse, takes no notice; in the face of outrageous insult he maintains an air of dignity and reserve, like a man conscious of inner rectitude.'

"'Did you talk with him, Lee Fu?'

"'Oh, yes. In fact, I cultivated his acquaintance. [It relieved, as it were, the daily monotony of virtue. Do not think that he is a simple man. His heart in this matter is unfathomable, and well worth sounding.]'

"'By Jove, I believe you liked him!'

"'No, not that.' Lee Fu folded his hands within the long sleeves of his embroidered coat and laid them across

his stomach in a characteristic attitude of meditation. 'No, quite the opposite. I abhorred him. He feels no remorse; he goes his way in peace from the betrayal of a sacred trust. He is an arch-criminal.'

" 'Aren't you laying it on a little thick?' I laughed.

" Lee Fu smiled quietly, giving me a glance that was a mere flicker of the eyelids. 'Captain, let me tell you, murder is brave and honorable compared to this. Consider what he did: Trained to the sea and ships, after a lifetime of service to his traditions, he suddenly forsakes them utterly. It is blasphemy which he has committed; blasphemy against the gods who guide and sustain us, and without whose aid we cannot live. So I abhor him — and am fascinated. If you will believe me, Captain, I have not in all my talk with him received a single flash of illumination; no, not one! There is no clue to his design. He speaks of his ship as others do; he is a big, red-faced man with frank glances and open speech. I swear to you, his heart is untroubled. And that is horrible.'

" I was a little amused at my friend's moral fervor. 'Perhaps he's innocent,' I said.

" 'You forget that he holds the vessel,' Lee Fu reminded me. 'To one of your race, if no blood flows, then it is not so bad. But bear in mind that a strong man within your circle has murdered the spirit — and wait until the actual blood flows.'

" 'What do you mean, Lee Fu?'

" 'I mean that Captain Wilbur will bear watching. In the meantime, do not fail to study him when opportunity offers. Thus we learn of heaven and hell.'

" A few years went by, while the case of Captain Wilbur and the 'Speedwell' was in its initial stages of being forgotten. Nothing succeeds like success; the man was growing rich, and there were many to whom the possession of a fine vessel covered a multitude of sins. Some of his old friends were willing after a while to let bygones be bygones. Little by little, one began to see him again on the quarter-deck of an evening, among the fleet captains. When, in time, it became unwise to start the story against him for fear of misconstruction of the motive, it was evident that he'd won his nefarious match against society.

"I'd met him a number of times during this interval. Indeed, he compelled attention. That perfect urbanity, that air of unfailing dignity and confidence, that aura of a commanding personality, of an able shipmaster among his brethren, of a man whose position in the world was secure beyond peradventure; these could spring only from a quiet conscience or from a heart perfectly attuned to villainy. So unconscious was his poise that one often doubted the evidence of memory, and found one's self going back over the record, only to fetch up point-blank against the incontestable fact that he had stolen his ship and had betrayed his profession.

" 'It is a triumph, a feat of character!' Lee Fu used to say, as we compared notes on the case from time to time. 'I think that he has not been guilty of a single minor error. His correctness is diabolical. It presages disaster, like too much fair weather in the typhoon season. Mark my word, Captain, when the major error comes it will be a great tragedy.'

" 'Must there be an error?' I asked, falling into the mood of Lee Fu's exaggerated concern. 'He has carried it off so far with the greatest ease.'

" 'Yes, with the greatest ease,' Lee Fu repeated thoughtfully. 'Yet I wonder if he has been properly put to the test. See how the world protects him! But he is not invulnerable. Life will yet challenge him — it must be. Can a man escape the gods? I wonder. That is why I concern myself with him — to know his destiny.'

" 'You admit, then, that he may be merely a stupid fool?' I chaffed.

" 'Not stupid,' said Lee Fu. 'Yet, on the other hand, not superior to life. Such faultless power of will is in itself no mean share of ability. He is, as you might say, self-centered — most accurately self-centered. But the challenge of the gods displaces the center of all. He will be like a top that is done spinning. A little breath may topple him. Wait and see.'

"Voyage followed voyage; and one time, when I had come in from Bangkok and was on my way to Lee Fu's office I passed Captain Wilbur on the opposite side of

Queen's Road. It flashed across my mind that I hadn't observed the 'Speedwell' in harbor.

"The fact is, the successful Captain Wilbur has retired from active service on the sea," Lee Fu explained with a quizzical smile, when I put the question. "He is now a ship owner alone, and has favored Hong Kong above all other ports as the seat of his retirement. He resides in a fine house on Graham Terrace, and has chairmen in white livery edged with crimson. Captain Nichols, you should steal a ship."

"Who goes in the 'Speedwell'?"

"An old friend of ours, one Captain Turner," said Lee Fu slowly, without looking in my direction.

"Not Will Turner?"

"The same."

"I pursed up my mouth in a silent whistle. Will Turner in the 'Speedwell!' Poor old chap, he must have lost another ship. Hard luck seemed to pursue him, gave him no rest on land or sea. A capable sailor and an honest man, yet life had afforded him nothing but a succession of black eyes and heavy falls. Death and sorrow, too; he had buried a wife and child, swept off by cholera, in the Bay of Bengal. Turner and I had landed together in the China Sea; I knew his heart, his history, some of his secrets, and liked him tremendously for the man he was.

"Watching Lee Fu in silence, I thought of the relationship between Will Turner and this extraordinary Chinaman. I won't go into the story, but there were overwhelming reasons why they should think well of each other; why Lee Fu should respect and honor Turner, and why Turner should hold Lee Fu as his best friend.

"I did not know of the plan until he had accepted," Lee Fu was saying. "I did everything in my power to dissuade him."

"Didn't Wilbur do the right thing?"

"Oh, yes. But it is unthinkable, Captain, that he should command the 'Speedwell.' The jealous gods have not yet shown their hand."

"Nonsense, Lee Fu!" I exclaimed, a little irritated. "Since the thing is done, hadn't we better try to be practical?"

“ ‘Exactly,’ said Lee Fu. ‘Let us be practical. Captain, is it impossible for the Caucasian to reason from cause to effect? There seems to be no logic in your design; which explains many curious facts of history. I have merely insisted that a man who would do one thing would do another, and that, sooner or later, life would present to him another thing to do.’

“ ‘But I’ve known too many men to escape what you call destiny,’ I argued peevishly.

“ ‘Have you?’ inquired Lee Fu.

“That year I went into the Malay Archipelago for an extended cruise, was gone seven months among the islands, and reached Hong Kong just ahead of a bad blow. Typhoon signals were flying from the Peak as I came in; the sky to the eastward had lowered and darkened like a shutter, and the breeze had begun to whip in vicious gusts across the harbor. I carried important communications for Lee Fu, so went ashore at once. The outer office was full of gathering gloom, although it was still early afternoon. Sing Toy immediately took in my name; and soon I was ushered into the familiar room, where my friend sat beside a shaded lamp, facing a teakwood desk inlaid with ivory, and invariably bare, save for a priceless Ming vase and an ornament of old green bronze.

“ ‘I am glad to see you, Captain,’ he said dispassionately. ‘Sit down. I have bad news.’

“ ‘Yes?’ I queried, more than a little alarmed.

“Folding his hands across his stomach and slightly bowing his head, he gazed at me with a level upturned glance that, without betraying expression, carried by its very immobility a hint of deep emotion. ‘It is as I told you,’ he said at last. ‘Now, perhaps, you will believe.’

“ ‘For heaven’s sake, what are you talking about?’ I demanded.

“ ‘We had another typhoon this season, a very early one. It was this typhoon into whose face our late friend Captain Turner took his ship, the “Speedwell,” sailing from Hong Kong for New York some four months ago. Three days after sailing, he met the typhoon and was blown upon a lee shore two hundred miles along the China coast. In this predicament, he cut away his masts

and came to anchor. But his ship would not float, and accordingly sunk at the anchors.'

" 'Sunk at her anchors!' I exclaimed. 'How could that be? A tight ship never did such a thing.'

" 'Nevertheless, she sunk in the midst of the gale, and all on board perished. Afterwards the news was reported from shore, and the hull was discovered in ten fathoms of water. There has been talk of trying to save the ship; and Captain Wilbur himself, in a diver's suit, has inspected the wreck. Surely, he should know if it is possible to salvage her! He says no, and it is reported that the insurance companies are in agreement with him.' Lee Fu's voice dropped to a rasping tone. 'The lives, of course, he cannot save.'

" I sat for some moments gazing at the green bronze dragon on the desk, stunned by what I had heard. Turner gone? Even between us, who had seen each other seldom in late years, there had been a bond. Weren't we known as the two Eastern wanderers?

" 'That is not all,' said Lee Fu suddenly. 'What more?' I asked.

" 'Listen, Captain, and pay close attention. Some weeks after the loss of the "Speedwell," it came to my ears that a man had a tale worth hearing. He was brought; he proved to be a common coolie who had been employed in the loading of the "Speedwell." This coolie had been gambling during the dinner hour, and had lost the small sum that he should have taken home as the result of several days' labor. Likewise, he feared his wife, and particularly her mother, who was a shrew. In a moment of desperation, as the lighter was preparing to leave for the night, he escaped and secreted himself in the hold of the vessel.

" 'He had long been asleep that night when he was suddenly awakened by a sound on the ladder leading from the upper deck. It was a sound of careful steps, mingled with a faint metallic rattling. A moment later a foot descended on the floor of the between-decks, and a lantern was cautiously lighted. The coolie retreated quickly into the lower hold, and from his post among the bales of merchandise was able to see all that went on.'

"Again Lee Fu paused, as if lingering over the scene. 'It seems that this late and secret comer into the hold of the "Speedwell" was none other than her owner, Captain Wilbur,' he slowly resumed. 'The coolie knew him by face, and had seen him come on board that afternoon. Afterwards, through my inquiries, I learned that Captain Turner had spent that night on shore. It was Captain Wilbur's custom, it seems, frequently to sleep on board his ship when she lay in port. Have you ever been in the lower hold of the "Speedwell," Captain Nichols?'

"'No, I haven't.'

"'But you recall her famous ports?'

"'Yes, indeed.' The incident at once came back to me in detail. The 'Speedwell' once had carried a cargo of ironwood from Singapore for a temple up the Yangtse-kiang. In order to load the immense timbers, she had been obliged to cut bow ports of extraordinary size, fifty inches in depth, they were, and nearly seven feet in width, according to my recollection.

"'It has been my privilege,' said Lee Fu, 'to examine carefully the forepeak of this vessel. I had chartered her one time, and felt alarmed for her safety until I had seen the interior fastenings of these great windows that looked out into the deep sea. But my alarm was groundless. There was a most ingenious device for strengthening the bows where they had been weakened by the cutting of the ports. Four or five timbers had, of course, been severed; but these were reproduced on the port itself, and the whole was fashioned like a massive door. It lifted upward on immense wrought-iron hinges; when it was lowered in place gigantic bars of iron, fitted into brackets on the adjoining timbers, stretched across its face to hold it against the impact of the waves. Thus the port, when tightly caulked from without, became again an integral part of the hull; I was told that there had never been a trace of leakage from her bows. And, most remarkable of all, I was told, when it became necessary to open these ports for use, the task could easily be accomplished by two or three men and a stout watch-tackle. This I am now prepared to believe.

“ ‘But, to resume the account of the coolie,’ Lee Fu went on with exasperating deliberation. ‘This is what he saw: Our friend Captain Wilbur descended into the lower hold, and forward to the forepeak, where there was little cargo. There he worked with great effort for several hours. He had equipped himself with a short crowbar, and carried a light tackle wrapped beneath his coat. The tackle he loosened and hung to a hook above the middle of the port; it was merely for the purpose of lowering the iron crossbars so that they would make no noise. Had one fallen —’

“ ‘Good God, Lee Fu, what are you trying to tell me?’

“ ‘Merely an incident of the night. So, with the crowbar, Captain Wilbur pried loose the iron braces, slinging them in his tackle and dropping them softly one by one into the ship’s bottom. It was a heavy task; the coolie said that sweat poured from the big man like rain. Last of all he covered the bars with dunnage, and rolled against the bow several bulky bales of matting to conceal the work. Captain, when the “Speedwell” sailed from Hong Kong in command of our honored friend, one of her great bow ports below the water hung on its hinges without internal fastenings, and held in place only by the tightness of the caulking. The first heavy weather —’

“ ‘Can this be possible?’ I said through clenched teeth.

“ ‘Oh, yes, so easily possible that it happened,’ answered Lee Fu.

“ ‘But why should he do such a thing? Had he anything against Turner?’

“ ‘Captain, you do not understand. He merely was tired of the vessel; and freights are becoming very poor. He wanted his insurance. He had no thought of disaster so he now assures himself; what he had in mind was for the ship to sink discreetly in pleasant weather. Yet he was willing enough to run the chance of wholesale murder.’

“ ‘I got up and began pacing the floor; the damnable affair had made me sick at heart, and a little sick at the stomach.

“ ‘Thus the gods have struck,’ said Lee Fu behind me, in that changeless voice that for a moment seemed

to concentrate the echo of the ages. 'There is blood at last, Captain — twenty-seven lives, and among them one dear to us — enough even to convince one of your race that a crime has been committed. But I was mistaken in much that I foresaw. The criminal, it seems, is destined not to suffer. He has escaped the gods.'

" 'Can't you bring him to a reckoning? Isn't there some way —'

" Lee Fu shook his head. 'No, Captain, he is amply protected. What could I accomplish in your courts with this fantastic tale, and for witnesses a coolie and a sampan man?'

" I continued to pace the floor, thinking dark thoughts. There was a way, of course, between man and man; but such things are no longer done in the heart of civilization, except in sudden passion or jealousy.

" Pacing rapidly, and oblivious to everything but the four walls of the room, I nearly ran into Sing Toy coming in with a message from the outer office. He whispered a word in Lee Fu's ear.

" 'Ah!' exclaimed Lee Fu sharply. I started, whirled around. His voice had lost the level, passive tone; it had taken on the timbre of action.

" 'Send him in,' he said in Chinese to Sing Toy.

" 'Who is it?' I asked breathlessly.

" 'The man we have been speaking of.'

" 'Wilbur? What the devil does he want?'

" 'Nothing,' answered Lee Fu, speaking swiftly. 'He merely came to make a call. So he thinks; but I think otherwise. Beware of word or glance. This chanced by arrangement. We are on the threshold of the gods.'

" Lee Fu remained standing as Captain Wilbur entered the room. His hurried admonition still rang in my ears: 'Keep silence — beware of word or glance!' But I couldn't have spoken intelligibly just then. To beware of glances was a different matter. I stood as if rooted to the floor, gazing point-blank at Wilbur with a stare that must have made him wonder as to my sanity.

" 'Good afternoon, Captain Wilbur,' said Lee Fu blandly. 'I think you are acquainted with Captain Nichols, of the bark "Omega"?''

" 'Oh, how-do, Nichols,' said Wilbur, advancing down the room. 'I've missed you around town for a good while. Glad you're back. I suppose you had the usual assortment of adventures?'

"I drew back to escape shaking his hand.

" 'No,' I answered, 'nothing like the adventure that awaited me here.'

"He settled himself in a chair, directly in range of the light, smiled, and lifted his eyebrows. 'So? Well, I can believe you. This office, you know, is the heart of all adventure.' He bowed toward Lee Fu, who had resumed his seat.

" 'You honor me, Captain,' replied the Chinaman. 'Yet it is only life which may be called the heart of adventure — life, with its amazing secrets that one by one transpire into the day, and with its enormous burden of evil that weighs us down like slaves.'

"Wilbur laughed. 'Yes, that's it, no doubt. Good, too, Lee Fu, plenty of good. Don't be pessimistic. But I suppose you're right, in a way; the evil always does manage to be more romantic.'

" 'Much more romantic,' said Lee Fu. 'And the secrets are more romantic still. Consider, for instance, the case of a dark secret, which by chance has already become known. How infinitely romantic! Though the man feels secure, yet inevitably it will be disclosed. When, and how? Such a case would be well worth watching — as the great writer had in mind when he wrote, "Murder will out."'

"The winged words made no impression on their mark. Wilbur met Lee Fu's glance frankly, innocently, with interest. By Jove, he was wonderful! The damned rascal hadn't a nerve in his body.

"I examined him closely. Above a trimmed brown beard his cheeks showed the ruddy color of health and energy; his eyes were steady; his mouth was strong and clean; a head of fine gray hair surmounted a high forehead; the whole aspect of his countenance was pleasing and dignified. Sitting at ease, dressed neatly in blue serge, with an arm thrown over the chair back and one ankle resting on the other knee, he presented a fine figure.

"He gave a hearty laugh. 'For the Lord's sake, come!

out of the gloom!' he cried. 'I drop in for a chat, and find a couple of blue devils up to their ears in the sins of humanity. Nichols over there has hardly opened his mouth.'

" 'It is the mood of the approaching storm,' interposed Lee Fu quietly.

"A fiercer squall than the last shook the building; it passed in a moment as if dropping us in mid-air. Wilbur was the first to speak. 'Yes, it's going to be a hummer, isn't it? A bad night to be on the water, gentlemen. I wouldn't care to be threshing around outside, now, as poor old Turner was such a short while ago.'

"I could have struck him across the mouth for his callousness.

"Lee Fu's voice fell like oil on a breaking sea. 'All signs point to another severe typhoon. It happened, Captain, that we were discussing the loss of the "Speedwell" when you came in.'

" 'Too bad — too bad,' said Wilbur slowly, with a shake of the head. 'You were away, Nichols, weren't you? It was a bad week here, I can tell you, after the news came in. I shall never forget it. Well, we take our chances.'

" 'Some of us do, and some of us don't,' I snapped.

" 'That's just the way I feel about it,' he said simply. 'It came home hard to me.' My jaw fairly dropped as I listened. Was it possible that he liked to talk about the affair?

" 'We were wondering,' observed Lee Fu, 'why it was that the "Speedwell" did not remain afloat. What is your opinion, Captain Wilbur?'

" 'It isn't a matter of opinion,' Wilbur answered. 'Haven't I seen you since the inspection? Why, the starboard bow port is stove in. I've always been afraid of those big bow ports. When I heard the peculiar circumstances, I knew in my heart what had happened.'

" 'Did you?' inquired Lee Fu, with a slight hardening of the voice. 'Captain, have you collected your insurance?'

"Wilbur frowned and glanced up sharply, very properly offended. The next moment he had decided to pass it off

as an instance of alien manners. 'I've just cleaned up today,' he replied brusquely. 'Had my last settlement with Lloyd's this morning — and did a silly thing, if you'll believe me. They had a package of large denomination bank notes, crisp, wonderful looking fellows; I took a sudden fancy and asked for my money in this form. To tell the truth, I've got it on me now; must get to the bank, too, before it closes.'

" 'What is the amount of the bank notes which you have in your possession?' asked Lee Fu in a level tone that carried its own insult.

" Wilbur showed his astonishment. 'Amount? Well, if you want all the details, I've got about forty thousand dollars in my pocket.'

" Lee Fu turned and shot at me a blank stare full of meaning; it might have been a look of caution, or a glance of triumph. I knew that I was expected to understand something, to glimpse some pregnant purpose; but for the life of me I couldn't catch on.

" 'I, also, knew in my heart what had happened,' said Lee Fu slowly, staring at Wilbur with a steady gaze. As he looked, he reached out with his right hand and opened the top drawer of the desk. Suddenly he stood up. The hand held a revolver, pointed at Wilbur's breast.

" 'If you move from your chair, Captain, I will shoot you dead, and your end will never be known,' he said rapidly. 'It is time we came to an understanding for the day wanes.'

" Wilbur uncrossed his legs, leaned forward, and looked at Lee Fu narrowly. 'What's the joke?' he asked.

" 'A joke that will be clear as time goes on — like one you played with bow ports on my friend. Captain, we are going on a journey. Will you join us, Captain Nichols, or will you remain on shore?'

" The question was perfunctory; Lee Fu knew well enough that my decision was in his hands. I stood up — for until now I had been chained to my chair by the amazing turn of the moment.

" 'Bow ports?' Wilbur was saying. 'Put that gun down! What in hell do you mean?' He started to rise.

" 'Sit down!' commanded Lee Fu. 'I mean that I'

will shoot. This is not play.' Wilbur sank back, angry and confused.

" 'Are you crazy, Lee Fu?' he demanded. 'What's the meaning of this, Nichols? Do you intend to rob me? Have both of you gone mad?'

" 'Is it possible that you do not comprehend that I share your secret?' asked Lee Fu sternly. 'You were observed, Captain, that night in the forepeak of the "Speedwell;" and those details, also, are known to me. It is needless to dissemble.'

" 'That night in the forepeak? — Lee Fu, for God's sake, what are you talking about?'

" 'Ah!' exclaimed Lee Fu with evident satisfaction. 'You are worthy of the occasion, Captain. That is well. It will be most interesting.'

" He slapped his left palm sharply on the desk; Sing Toy appeared at the door as if by a mechanical arrangement. 'Bring oilskin coats and hats for three,' Lee Fu commanded. 'Also, send in haste to my cruising sampan, with orders to prepare for an immediate trip. Have water and food provided for a week. We come within the half hour and sail without delay.'

" 'Master!' protested Sing Toy. 'Master, the typhoon!'

" 'I know, fool,' answered Lee Fu. 'I am neither deaf nor blind. Have I not ordered oilskin coats? Do as I have said.'

" He sat down, resting the gun on the corner of the desk, and resumed the bland tone of conversation. 'I am sorry, gentlemen, that the rain has already come; but there is water also below, as Captain Wilbur should be aware. Yes, it was destined from the first to be a wet journey. Yet it will still be possible to breathe; and not so bad as solid water on all sides, where, after a grim struggle, one lies at rest, neither caring nor remembering — Captain Wilbur, listen to me. We go from this office to my sampan, which lies moored at the bulkhead not far away. During the walk, you will precede us. I will hold my revolver in my hand — and I am an excellent shot. If you attempt to escape, or to communicate with any passer-by, you will immediately be dead. Do not think that I would fear

the consequences; we will pass through Chinese streets, where action of mine would not be questioned.'

" 'Damn you!' Wilbur burst out. 'What silly nonsense are you up to? Nichols, will you permit this? Where are you going to take me?'

" 'Never mind,' replied Lee Fu. 'As for Captain Nichols, he, also, is at my mercy. Ah, here are the rain-coats. Put one on, Captain Wilbur; you will need it sorely before your return. Now we must hurry. I would be clear of the harbor before darkness entirely falls.'

"Issuing from the doorway, the gale caught us with a swirl that carried us around the corner and down a side street. 'To the right!' Lee Fu shouted. Wilbur, lurching ahead, obeyed sullenly. We came about and made for the water front through the fringe of the Chinese quarter, the most remarkable trio, perhaps, that had ever threaded those familiar thoroughfares.

"Overhead, the sky had settled low on the slope of the Peak. We floundered on, enveloped in a gray gloom like that of an eclipse. When we reached the water front the face of the bay had undergone a sinister change, its yellow-green waters lashed into sickly foam and shrouded by an unnatural gleaming darkness. A distant moaning sound ran through the upper air, vague yet distinctly audible. The center of the typhoon was headed in our direction.

"As we staggered along the quay, my thoughts worked rapidly. I saw the plan now, and recognized the dangerous nature of the undertaking on which we'd embarked. It was to be a game of bluff, in which we would have to risk our lives if the other held his ground.

"I edged toward Lee Fu. 'Will you go on the water?' I asked in his ear.

"He nodded, keeping his eyes fixed on Wilbur ahead.

" 'But it can't be done,' I told him. 'A boat won't live.'

" 'There is always a definite alternative,' he replied abruptly.

" 'Yes — that we sink.'

" 'Exactly.'

"All at once, in a flash of enlightenment, the greatness of the occasion came to me. By Jove! He had taken the

matter in his own hands; he had stepped in when the gods had failed. But he had observed the divine proprieties; had seen that if he presumed to act for the gods he must throw his own life, as well, into the balance. He must run every risk. It was for them, after all, to make the final choice. He was only forcing action on the gods.

"I gazed at him in wonder. He advanced stiffly against the storm, walking like an automaton. Beneath the close pulled rim of a black sou'wester his smooth oval countenance looked ridiculously vacant, like the face of a placid moon. He was the only calm object on earth, sea or sky; against the lashing rain, the dancing boats, the scudding clouds, the hurried shadows of appearing and vanishing men, he stood out plainly, a different essence, a higher spirit, the embodiment of mind and will.

"And how was it with Wilbur, off there in the lead? He, too, walked stiffly, wrapped in thought. Once he turned, as if to come back and speak to us; then whirled with a violent movement of decision and plunged on into the rain. He knew, now, what it was all about, if not what to expect. He knew that his crime had been discovered. Yet he had made no break; in no particular had he given himself away. What had he decided? What had he been about to say? Would he confess, when he faced death on the water; or would he be confident enough to believe that he could beat the game?

"Observing his broad back, his commanding figure, that looked thoroughly at home in its oilskin coat and leaning against the storm, it came to me that he would put up a desperate defense before he succumbed. He, too, was a strong man, and no part of a coward; he, too, in a different way, was a superior being, the embodiment of mind and will.

"Then, for a moment, my own spirit went slump with the realization of what lay before us, and a great weakness overcame me. I edged again toward Lee Fu.

"'My God, what if the man really is innocent?' I cried. 'He hasn't turned a hair.'

"Lee Fu gave me a flash of the moon face beneath the sou'wester. 'Have no fear, my friend,' he reassured

me. 'I am completely satisfied, in regions where the soul dwells.'

"When we reached the sampan, lying under a weather shore beneath the bulkhead, we found a scene of consternation. Lee Fu's orders had arrived, and had been executed; yet the men couldn't believe that he actually meant to sail. Gathered in a panic-stricken group on the fore deck of the sampan, they chattered like a flock of magpies; as they caught sight of us, they swarmed across the bulkhead and fell at Lee Fu's feet, begging for mercy.

"'Up, dogs!' he cried. 'There is no danger. I shall steer, and it is necessary that we go. If any would remain, let them depart now, with no tale to tell. Let those who stay prepare at once for sea.'

"I found Wilbur beside me. 'What's this madness, Nichols?' he demanded for the third and last time.

"'I know no more about it than you do,' I answered shortly. 'He has told his crew to prepare for sea. If he goes, we all go.'

"A moment later we stood on the quarter-deck of the cruising sampan. Lee Fu took his station at the great tiller. The wind lulled, as the trough of a squall passed over; he gave a few sharp orders. Moorings were cast off, a pinch of sail was lifted forward. The big craft found her freedom with a lurch and a stagger; then pulled herself together and left the land with a steady rush, skimming dead before the wind across the smooth upper reach of the harbor and quickly losing herself in the murk and spray that hung off Kowloon Point. Lee Fu somehow managed to avoid the fleet at anchor off Wanchi; straight down the length of the bay he struck, and in an incredibly short time we had left the harbor behind and were whirling through the narrow gut of Lymoon Pass before a terrific squall, bound for the open sea.

"I watched Captain Wilbur. He stood carelessly at the rail during our race down the harbor, scanning the boat and the water with an air of confidence and unconcern. A sneer curled his lip; he had made up his mind to see the nonsense through. The sailor in him had quickly recognized that the craft would stand the weather in smooth water; he probably expected any minute that

Lee Fu would call it quits and put into some sheltered cove.

"But when we shot through Lymoon Pass, I saw him turn and scrutinize the Chinaman closely. Darkness was falling behind the murk, the real night now; and ahead of us lay a widening reach among the islands that opened abruptly on the main body of the China Sea. We were rapidly leaving the protection of Victoria Island. Soon we would be unable to see our way. Ten miles outside a high sea was running. And with every blast of wind that held in the same quarter, the center of the typhoon was bearing down on us with unerring aim.

"These things were as patent to Wilbur as to any of us. In fact, his knowledge was his undoing; had he been less of a sailor, or had he been entirely ignorant of sea matters, he could have resigned himself to the situation on the assumption that Lee Fu never would put himself in actual danger. Perhaps Lee Fu had foreseen this when he chose the sea as the medium of justice; perhaps he had glimpsed the profound and subtle truth that Wilbur couldn't properly be broken save in his native environment. He knew the sea, had trifled with it; then let him face the sea.

"The time came, just before we lost the loom of the land, when Wilbur could stand it no longer; as a sailor, used to responsibility and command, he had to speak his mind.

"He dropped aft beside Lee Fu, and put his hand to his mouth. 'You're running to your death!' he shouted. 'You've already lost Pootoy. If you can't haul up and make the lee of the Lema Islands—'

" 'I intend to pass nowhere near them,' answered Lee Fu, keeping his eyes on the yawning bow of the sampan.

" 'There's nothing to the eastward — no shelter.'

" 'Of that I am aware.'

" 'Do you know what that means?' Wilbur pointed above the stern rail into the face of the storm.

" 'I think we will get the center, Captain, by tomorrow noon.'

"Wilbur made a move as if to grasp the tiller. 'Haul up, you fool!'

"A stray gleam in the gathering darkness caught the

barrel of the revolver, as Lee Fu steered for a moment with one hand.

" 'Beware, Captain! You are the fool; would you broach us to, and end it now? One thing alone will send me to seek the last shelter; and for that thing I think you are not ready.' "

" 'What?' "

" 'To say that you sunk the "Speedwell." ' "

" Wilbur gathered his strength as if to strike; his face was distorted with passion.

" 'You lie, you yellow hound!' "

" 'Exactly — Captain, be careful — come no nearer! Also, leave me alone. If you value your life, you will keep silence and stay a little forward. Go, quickly! Here I could shoot you with the greatest impunity.' "

Nichols paused. " Maybe some of you fellows haven't seen Lee Fu's cruising sampan," he remarked. " In reality, she's more of a junk than a sampan, a sizable craft of over a hundred tons, and the best product of the Chinese shipyard. Lee Fu had her built for trips along the coast, and many of his own ideas, born of an expert knowledge of ships of every nationality entered into her construction. The result is distinctly a Chinese creation, a craft that seems to reflect his personality, that responds to his touch and works with him. She's higher in the bows than an ordinary junk, and lower in the stern; a broad, shallow hull that needs a centerboard on the wind. Of course she's completely decked over for heavy weather. In charge of any of us, perhaps, she would be unmanageable; but in his hands, I can assure you, she's a sea boat of remarkable attainments.

" I had seen him handle her under difficult conditions, but never in such a pass as this. How he did it was inconceivable to me. The last I saw of him that night he had called two men to help him at the tiller; and, so far, he had kept the craft before the wind.

" For many hours I was surrounded by pitch blackness and the storm. I clung to a single stanchion, hardly changing my position during the night, drenched by rain and spray, seeing nothing, hearing no word. The gale roared above us with that peculiar tearing sound that

accompanies the body of a typhoon; a sound suggestive of unearthly anger and violence, as if elemental forces were ripping up the envelope of the universe. The wind gained steadily in volume; it picked up the sea in steep ridges of solid water that flung us like a chip from crest to crest, or caught us, burst above us and swallowed us whole, as if we had suddenly sunk in a deep well. Every moment I expected would be our last. Yet, as time wore on, I felt through the sampan's frantic floundering a hand of guidance, a touch of mastery. Lee Fu steered, and she was still in his control. A night to turn the hair gray, to shatter the mind. "But we came through, and saw the dawn. A pale watery light little by little crept into the east, disclosing a scene of terror beyond description. The face of the sea was livid with flying yellow foam; the torn sky hung closely over it like the fringe of a mighty waterfall. In the midst of this churning cauldron our little craft seemed momentarily on the point of disappearing, engulfed by the wrath of the elements.

"In the lull of the storm my glance encountered Wilbur; for a long while I'd forgotten him entirely. He hung to the rail a little farther forward, gazing across the maelstrom with a fixed, exhausted expression. His face was haggard; the strain of the night had marked him with a ruthless hand. As I watched him, his eye turned slowly in my direction; he gave me an anxious look, then crawled along the rail to a place by my side.

" 'Nichols, we're lost!' I heard him cry in my ear. The voice was almost plaintive; it suddenly made me angry, revived a few sparks of my own courage.

" 'What of it?' I cried harshly. 'Turner was lost.'

" 'You believe that, too?'

"I looked at him point-blank; his eyes shifted; he couldn't face me now. 'Yes, I do,' I told him. 'Why don't you own up, before — ?'

"He moved away hastily, as if offended to the heart. But the strong man had gone, the air of perfect confidence had disappeared; he was shattered and spent — but not yet broken. Pride is more tenacious than courage; and men with hearts of water will continue to function through self-esteem.

"Looking above his head, where the sky and the sea met in a blanket of flying spume, I caught sight for an instant of something that resembled the vague form of a headland. Watching closely, I soon saw it again — unmistakably the shadow of land to port, well forward of the beam. Land! That meant that the wind had shifted to the southward, that we were being blown against the shore.

"I worked my way cautiously aft, where Lee Fu stood like a man of iron at the tiller, lashed to the heavy cross-rail that must have been constructed for such occasions. He saw me coming, leaned toward me.

" 'Land!' I shouted, pointing on the port bow.

"He nodded vigorously, to show me that he'd already seen it. 'Recognize —' The rest of the answer was blown away by the wind.

"By pantomime, I called his attention to the shift of the storm. Again he nodded — then ducked his head in Wilbur's direction, and shouted something that I couldn't quite follow. 'Change our tactics — we must change our tactics —' was what I understood him to say.

"He beckoned me to come closer; grasping the cross-rail, I swung down beside him.

" 'I know our position,' he cried in my ear. 'Have no alarm, my friend. There are two large islands, and a third, small like a button. Watch closely the button, while I steer. When it touches the high headland, give me the news instantly.'

"He had hauled the junk a trifle to port, and with every opportunity was edging toward the land. The tall headland that I'd first sighted grew plainer with every moment; soon I made out the island like a button and saw it closing rapidly on the land behind.

" 'Now!' I shouted to Lee Fu, when the two had touched.

"He swung the sampan a couple of points to starboard, discovering close beneath our bows the tip of another reef that stretched toward the land diagonally across the path of the wind. In a moment we were almost abreast this point of reef; a hundred yards away, its spray lashed our decks as the low-lying black rocks caught the broken wash of the storm. Another swing of the great tiller, and we had

hauled up in the lee of the reef — in quiet water at last, but with the gale still screaming overhead like a defeated demon.

"It was like nothing but a return from hell. The wind held us in a solid blast; but to feel the deck grow quiet, to be able to speak, to hear — and then, to see the land close aboard. By Jove, we were saved!

"A voice spoke gruffly beside us. 'By God, I hope you're satisfied!' We turned to see Wilbur at the head of the cross-rail. A twitching face belied the nonchalance that he'd attempted to throw into the words.

"'I don't know how we lived!' he snarled. 'What in the name of God made you try it? Nothing but luck — and now the typhoon's leaving us. We can wait here till the blow dies down.'

"'Is that all, Captain, that you have to say?' inquired Lee Fu, his attention riveted on the course.

"Wilbur clutched the rail as if he would tear it from its fastenings. 'A damned sight more, you blackguard; but I'll save it for the authorities!'

"'You feel no thanks for your escape — and there is nothing on your mind?'

"'Nothing but sleep — why should there be? Let's wind up this farce and get to anchor somewhere; I'm fagged out.'

"'No, we are going on,' said Lee Fu calmly, making no move to come into the wind. 'No time for rest, Captain; the journey is not done.'

"'Going on?' He turned fiercely, and for a moment he and Lee Fu gazed deep into each other's eyes in a grapple that gave no quarter.

"'Yes, Captain!' cried Lee Fu sharply. 'We have not yet reached the spot where the "Speedwell" met her doom. Now go! I cannot waste time in talk.'

"Since this experience, I've many times examined the charts of the region," Nichols went on. "But they don't begin to show it all. Beyond the middle island stretched a larger island, distant some five miles from the other; and between them lay the most intricate, extraordinary and terrible nest of reefs ever devised by the mind of the Maker and the hand of geologic change.

"The outlying fringe of reefs that had broken our first approach ended at the middle island; beyond that to windward lay clear water, and the nest of reefs that I've mentioned received the full force of the wind and sea. Five miles of water stretched in mad confusion, a solid whiteness of spouting foam that seemed to hold a hideous illumination. Beyond the point of the middle island the long wind-swept rollers burst in tall columns of spray that shut off the view like a curtain as we drew near, where the rocks began in an unbroken wall.

"It was directly against this wall that Lee Fu was driving the sampan. The first lift of the outside swell had already caught us. I held my breath, as moment by moment we cut down the margin of safety. No use to interfere; perhaps he knew what he was doing; perhaps he actually had gone mad under the terrific strain. As he steered, he seemed to be watching intently for landmarks. Was it possible that he still knew his bearings, that there was a way through?

"Wilbur, at Lee Fu's command, had left us without a word. He stood at the rail, supporting himself by main strength, facing the frightful line of the approaching reefs; and on his back was written the desperate struggle he was having. It bent and twisted, sagging with sudden irresolution, writhing with stubborn obduracy, straightening and shaking itself at times in a wave of firmness and confidence, only to quail once more before the sight that met his eyes. He couldn't believe that Lee Fu would hold the course. 'Only another moment!' he kept crying to himself. 'Hold on a little longer!' Yet his will had been sapped by the long hours of the night and the terror of the dawn; and courage, which with him had rested only on the sands of ostentation, had crumbled long ago.

"I turned away, overcome by a sickening sensation; I couldn't look longer. Lee Fu waited tensely, peering ahead and to windward with lightning glances. A wave caught us, flung us forward. Suddenly I heard him cry out at my side in exultation as he bore down on the tiller. The cry was echoed from forward by a loud scream that shot like an arrow through the thunder. Wilbur had sunk beside the rail. The sampan fell off, carried high on the wave.

"Then, in a moment like the coming of death, we plunged into the reef. I have no knowledge of what took place — and there are no words to tell the story. Solid water swamped us; the thunder of the surf stopped the mind. But we didn't touch, there was a way through, we had crossed the outer margin of the reef. We ran the terrible gauntlet of the reef, surrounded on every hand by towering breakers, lost in the appalling roar of the elements. Without warning, we were flung between a pair of jagged ledges and launched bodily on the surface of a concealed lagoon.

"A low rocky island lay in the center of the nest of reefs, with a stretch of open water to leeward of it, all completely hidden from view until that moment. The open water ran for perhaps a couple of miles; beyond it the surf began again in another unbroken line. It would take us ten minutes to cross the lagoon.

" 'Bring Captain Wilbur,' said Lee Fu.

" 'I crept forward, where Wilbur lay beside the rail, his arm around a stanchion. He was moaning to himself as if he'd been injured. I kicked him roughly; he lifted an ashen face.

" 'Come aft — you're wanted,' I cried. ~

"He followed like a dog. Lee Fu, at the tiller, beckoned us to stand beside him; I pulled Wilbur up by the slack of his coat, and pinned him against the cross-rail.

" 'This is the end,' said Lee Fu, speaking in loud jerks, as he steered across the lagoon. 'There is no way out, except by the way we came. That way is closed. Here we can find shelter until the storm passes, if you will speak. If not, we shall go on. By this time, Captain, you know me to be a man of my word.'

" 'You yellow devil!'

" 'Beyond these reefs, Captain, lies the wreck of your ship the "Speedwell." There my friend met death at your hands. You have had full time to consider. Will you join him, or return to Hong Kong? A word will save you. And remember that the moments are passing very swiftly.'

"With a last flicker of obstinate pride, Wilbur pulled himself together and whirled on us. 'It's a damnable lie!'

" 'Very well, Captain. Go forward once more, and reserve your final explanation for the gods.'

"The flicker of pride persisted; Wilbur staggered off, holding by the rail. I waited beside Lee Fu. Thus we stood, watching the approach of the lagoon's leeward margin. Had Lee Fu spoken truthfully; was there no way out? I couldn't be certain; all I knew was that the wall of spouting surf was at our bows, that the jaws of death seemed opening again.

"Suddenly Wilbur's head snapped back; he flung up his arms in a gesture of finality, shaking clenched fists into the sky. He was at the point of surrender. The torture had reached his vitals. He floundered aft.

" 'What is it I must say?' he cried hoarsely, in a voice that by its very abasement had taken on a certain dignity.

" 'Say that you sunk the "Speedwell."'

"His face was shocking; a strong man breaking isn't a pleasant object. In a flash I realized how awful had been this struggle of the wills. He came to the decision as we watched, lost his last grip.

" 'Of course I did it! You knew it all along! I had no intention — You madman! For God's sake, haul up, before you're in the breakers!'

" 'Show me your insurance money.'

"Wilbur dug frantically in an inside pocket, produced a packet of bank notes, held them in a hand that trembled violently as the gale fluttered the crisp leaves.

" 'Throw them overboard.'

"For the fraction of a second he hesitated; then all resolution went out in his eyes like a dying flame. He extended his arm and loosed the notes; they were gone down the wind before our eyes could follow them.

"In the same instant Lee Fu flung down the great tiller. The sampan came into the wind with a shock that threw us to the deck. Close under our lee quarter lay the breakers, less than a couple of hundred yards away. Lee Fu made frantic signals forward, where the crew were watching us in utter terror. I felt the centerboard drop; a patch of sail rose on the main. The boat answered, gathered headway, drove forward —

"Wilbur lay as he had fallen, and made no move.

"Two nights later, under a clear starry sky, we slipped through Lymoon Pass on the tail of the land breeze. It fell flat calm before we reached Wanchi; the long sweeps were shipped, and the chattering crew, who'd never expected to see Hong Kong again, fell to work willingly. At length we rounded to against the bulkhead and settled into our berth, as if back from a late pleasure trip down the bay.

"A little forward, Wilbur rose to his feet. He hadn't spoken or touched food since that tragic hour under the reefs two nights before. Without a glance in our direction, he made for the side and stepped ashore. There was a bright light behind him; his form stood out plainly. It had lost the lines of vigor and alertness; it was the figure of a different and older man.

"A moment later he had lurched away, vanishing in the darkness of a side street. Three days later, we heard that he had taken the boat for Singapore. He hasn't been seen or heard of since that day.

"When he had gone, that night at the bulkhead, Lee Fu reached out a hand to help me to my feet. 'Thank you, Captain,' he said. 'For my part, it has been supremely interesting. For your part, I hope that you have been repaid?'

"'It's enough to be alive, just now,' I answered. 'I want a chart, Lee Fu. I want to see what you did. How you did it is quite beyond my comprehension.'

"'Oh, that? It was not much. The gods were always with us, as you must have observed. And I know that place pretty well.'

"'Evidently. Did the "Speedwell" fetch up among those reefs, or to leeward of them?'

"'The "Speedwell?" Captain, you did not believe my little pleasantry! We were nowhere near the wreck of the "Speedwell," as Captain Wilbur should have known had he retained his mind.'

"I smiled feebly. 'I didn't know it. Tell me another thing, Lee Fu. Were you bluffing, there at the last, or wasn't there really a hole through the reef?'

"'So far as I am aware, Captain, there was no passage,'

answered my imperturbable friend. 'I believe we were heading for the rocks when we came into the wind.'

" 'Would you have piled us up?'

" 'That is merely a hypothetical question. I knew that I would not be forced to do it. I was only afraid that, in the final anguish, Captain Wilbur would lose his sense of seamanship, and so would wait too long. That, I confess, would have been unfortunate. Otherwise, there was no doubt or especial danger.'

" 'I'm glad to know it!' I exclaimed, with a shudder of recollection. 'It wasn't apparent at the time.'

" 'No, perhaps not; time was very swift. In fact, he did wait too long. He was more willful than I had anticipated.'

" 'I gazed across the harbor, reviewing the experience. 'What did you have in mind,' I asked, 'before the typhoon shifted? Did you expect to catch the center?'

" 'I had no plan; it is dangerous to plan. There was a task to be begun; the determination of its direction and result lay with the gods. It was plain that I had been called upon to act; but beyond that I neither saw nor cared to see.'

" 'I could believe him only because I'd witnessed his incredible calm. He waved a hand toward the city. 'Come, my friend, let us sleep,' he said. 'We have earned our rest. Learn from this never to plan, and always to beware of overconfidence. It is by straining to look into the future that men exhaust themselves for present duty; and it is by making their little plans that men bring down the wrath of the gods. We are their instruments, molding in faith and humility our various destinies. Perhaps you thought me unfeeling, but I was only happy. There constantly were too many propitious signs.' "